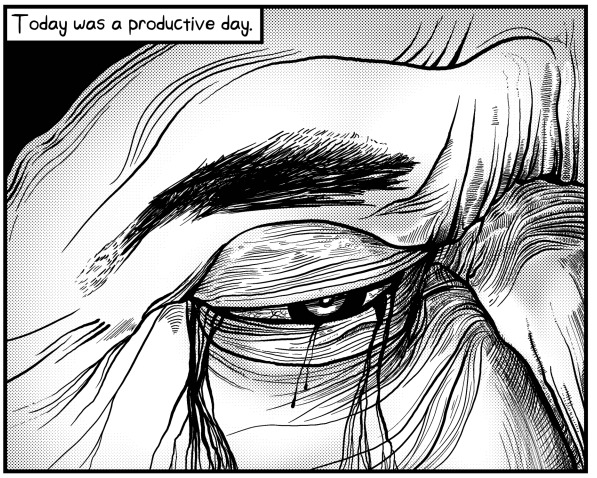
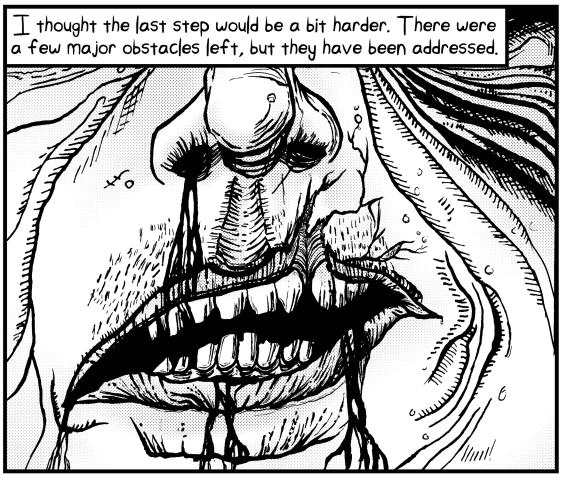
STRANGERS ON EARTH
IVAN FLORES
Chapter 0: Prologue

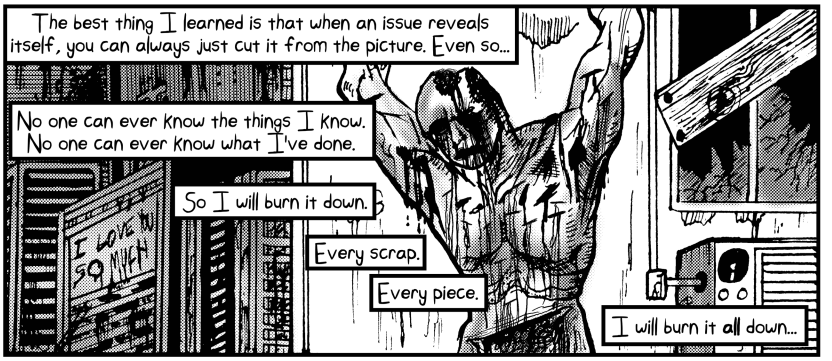
STRANGERS ON EARTH

STORY & ART BY
IVAN FLORES

STRANGERS ON EARTH #0. January 2024. The story, all names, characters, and incidents portrayed in this production are fictitious. No identification with actual persons living or deceased, places, buildings, and products is intended or should be inferred. This work was conceptualized, produced, and completed in full WITHOUT any assistance or use whatsoever of generative AI, large language models (LLMs), or any such systems or products.

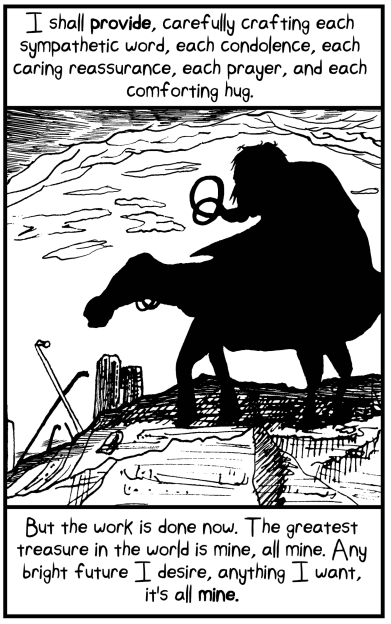

Today was a productive day.


I thought the last step would be a bit harder. There were a few major obstacles left, but they have been addressed.

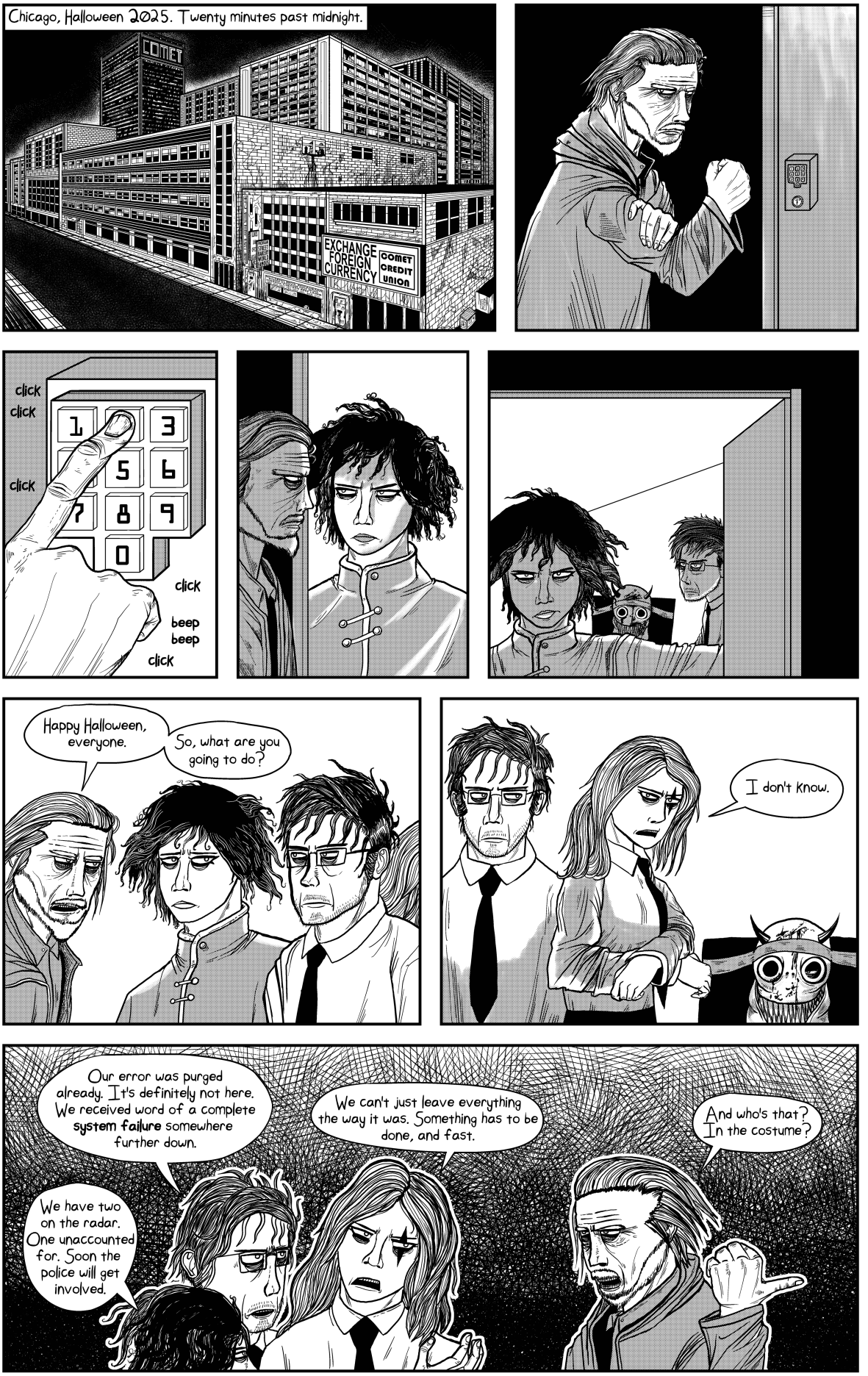

The best thing I learned is that when an issue reveals itself, you can always just cut it from the picture. Even so...
No one can ever know the things I know. No one can ever know what I've done.
So I will burn it down.
Every scrap.
Every piece.
I will burn it all down...

...until there is nothing left.

The authorities will want to talk to me. They will have many questions about my story.
When that time comes, I will gladly provide answers. All I have to do is follow the script and everyone else will fall in line. And for the ones they left behind...

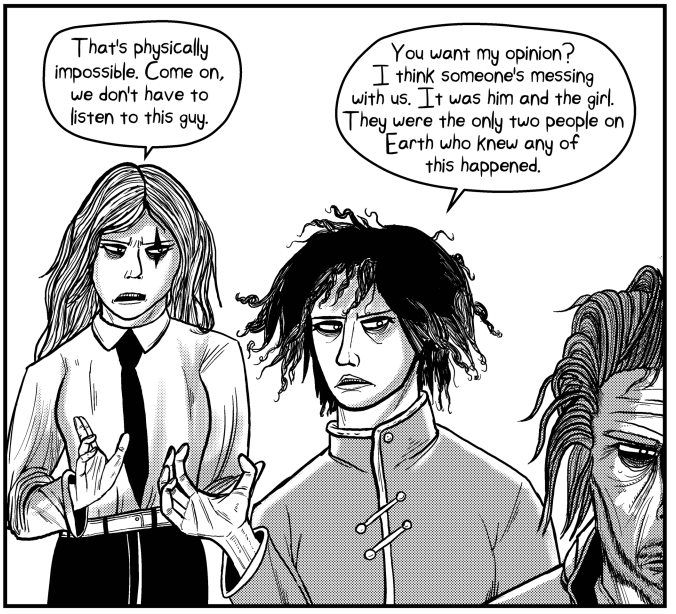

I shall **provide**, carefully crafting each sympathetic word, each condolence, each caring reassurance, each prayer, and each comforting hug.
But the work is done now. The greatest treasure in the world is mine, all mine. Any bright future I desire, anything I want, it's all **mine.**

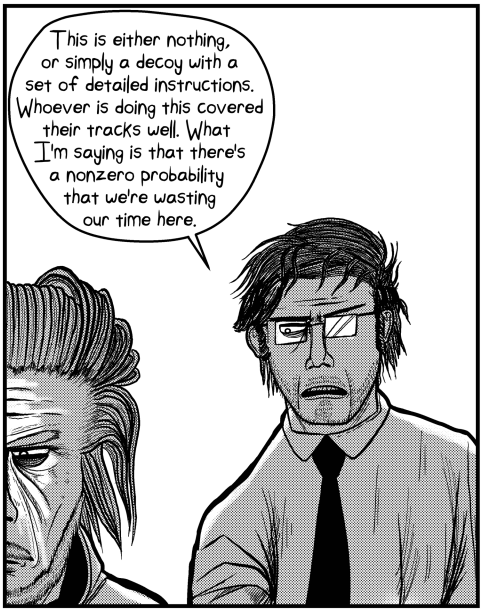
Everything is going to be okay.

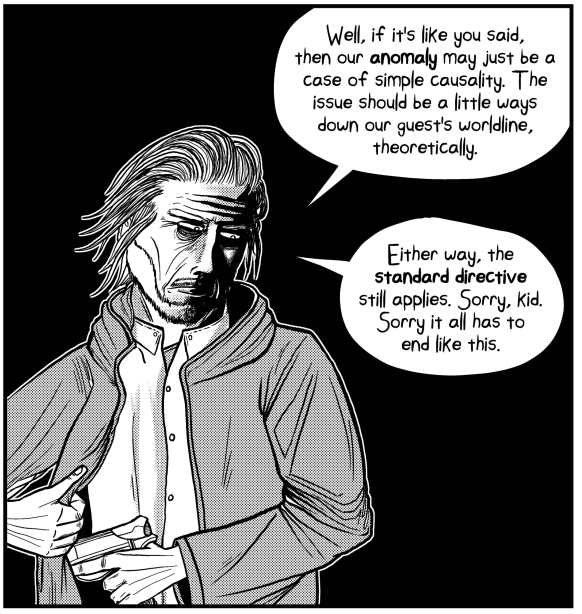

Chicago, Halloween 2025. Twenty minutes past midnight.
COMET
EXCHANGE FOREIGN CURRENCY
COMET CREDIT UNION
click
click
click
click
beep
beep
click
Happy Halloween, everyone.
So, what are you going to do?
I don't know.
Our error was purged already. It's definitely not here. We received word of a complete **system failure** somewhere further down.
We can't just leave everything the way it was. Something has to be done, and fast.
And who's that? In the costume?
We have two on the radar. One unaccounted for. Soon the police will get involved.

That's our guy, or at least we think so. We caught him on his way out. He seemed to be experiencing some sort of psychotic breakdown. He made quite an **annoying mess** downstairs. Think you can have a chat with him?

Okay, it's time to start talking. I need to know who sent you, where the machine is going, and everything that has happened to you in the last week or so. The whole story. Walk me through it.
It sounds like you have everything you need. I told your friends the same thing. **You lose.** There is no hope.


That's physically impossible. Come on, we don't have to listen to this guy.
You want my opinion? I think someone's messing with us. It was him and the girl. They were the only two people on Earth who knew any of this happened.


This is either nothing, or simply a decoy with a set of detailed instructions. Whoever is doing this covered their tracks well. What I'm saying is that there's a nonzero probability that we're wasting our time here.

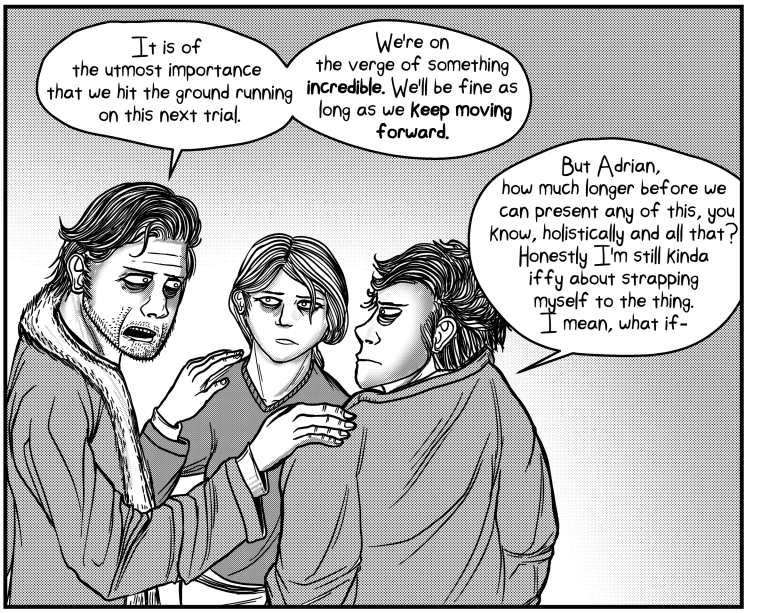

Well, if it's like you said, then our **anomaly** may just be a case of simple causality. The issue should be a little ways down our guest's worldline, theoretically.
Either way, the **standard directive** still applies. Sorry, kid. Sorry it all has to end like this.

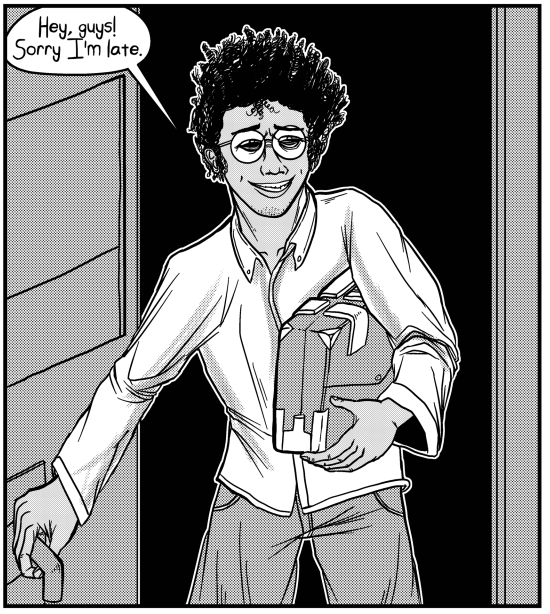
It **really** doesn't matter. I think I'm ready now. I hurt so many people. There were so many things I wanted to do, so many chances that I just...**didn't take.**
There's nothing left for me. The truth is, I'm better off dead.

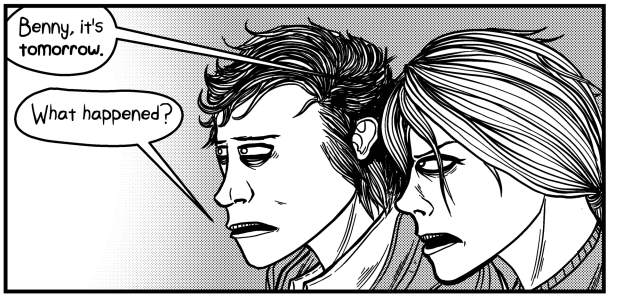
Do it and let's go. We can't continue this guesswork. This was something else. **This** was intentional. We're pushing it by looking the other way even **once.**
One life or a few million is a rounding error. This looks like bait.
I know what it **looks** like. These things, they always work out in the end. They have to.
We all have jobs to do, Officer. My methods are painless, I will do as I was instructed.
Pack up your things. It's going to be a long trip.
Wrap it up, and do it fast. We've wasted enough time chasing dead ends. Any more screw-ups, and maybe next time it'll be you on the receiving end of that gun, **Clairvoyant.**
It's okay, kid. I'm not going to hurt you.
You people. You think you're ready for what's ahead, but you're not. The only thing you can do now is leave and never come back.
I know my life is forfeit, but after tonight I might get to be with all my friends again.
Just make it **stop.**

The other side of town, the night before Halloween.
Hey Dimitri, you still thinking about getting that form? For the chip?
What form? George can have it. Not like I'm gonna need it. Why?
A little side project might be nice. You never know.
How though? Work's been all over the place. It's like boot camp out here with these clients and you-know-who.
Are you insinuating that Mr. Wagner of the illustriuous Comet Enterprises doesn't know what he's talking about?
Yes. Half the stuff isn't possible on those machines. The dude treats the software guys like they're wizards.
We're engineers, not soothsayers. This thing is a scary enough project on its own. I'm still trying to think of practical applications for these new trials.
All I'm saying is, I'm definitely quitting my job over this, or at least getting a better one. About time too.
I don't think we'll exactly need anyone to vouch for us if this thing works.
It better work. I don't know how many more of those big heat sinks they're gonna let me borrow from work. It looks like I'm robbing the place.
Well, is that an issue? Jesus, Charlotte, what are we even trying to sell? The thing's stable as-is. Besides, I think waveform gunk is gonna be the least of our worries if something overheats, or we don't shoot up enough.
Speaking of that, where the hell is Benny?
I don't know. If he's not here before midnight, I'm out.
Look, look. I'll just go to the store tomorrow after work. They're like eight bucks or something.
For what?
What?
Eight bucks for what?
Antifreeze, dummy.

Charlotte, Dimitri! Focus!


It is of the utmost importance that we hit the ground running on this next trial.
We're on the verge of something **incredible.** We'll be fine as long as we **keep moving forward.**
But Adrian, how much longer before we can present any of this, you know, holistically and all that? Honestly I'm still kinda iffy about strapping myself to the thing. I mean, what if-


Hey, guys! Sorry I'm late.


Benny, it's **tomorrow.**
What happened?

I'm really sorry, Charlotte. I was helping Mom fix the kitchen sink, it took forever.
But hey, I got the stuff. I'm so excited!

So... Does it hurt?
No, man. I didn't really feel anything.
I might have a more pressing question.

...Who's gonna go first?
RTI F4CT

All three of us are going at the same time. A few minutes before 11:40 PM tomorrow, Dimitri, yourself, and I will enter the **Artifact.**

Benjamin will be outside the vehicle, here in the garage. From there he will monitor the experiment. It's only fair since he volunteered for the last trial.

From there, it will be Benjamin's job to administer the anaesthetic and to monitor the status of our assigned Bell states, not to mention ensuring the Artifact's superposition.

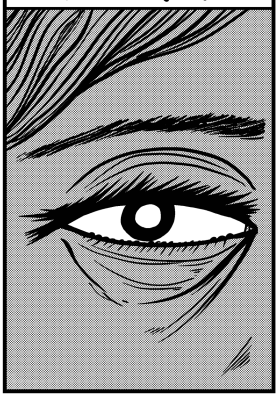
Are we still shooting for the same resolution?

Yes. The coherent vectors of the Artifact's engine will be resolved once Benny switches off the machine's controls remotely, at which point we will all be displaced.

To us, the entire process will be instant. However for Benny, the machine will reappear at exactly 12:00AM, November 1st, 2025. We'll wake up a few minutes after the displacement. When we exit the Artifact, all of the clocks inside will still read 11:40 PM. Remember last week? It's the same principle, except this time we're killing two birds with one stone by having a shorter "go-time" and two more live human subjects.

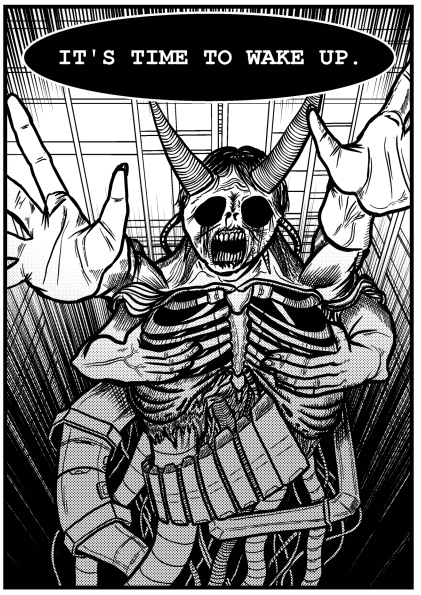
But what comes after? They'll say we're crazy for this. I hope you all realize that this breaks every rule in the book. We can't just follow a **protocol.** It's new. I think this goes without saying, but whatever happens tomorrow shouldn't leave this room.

Here, I'll explain for you and Charlotte's sake. You won't even remember the moment before the drugs kick in. You're just sitting there, and then boom, you're out. Thirty minutes went by for me, but during that time I just didn't perceive anything.

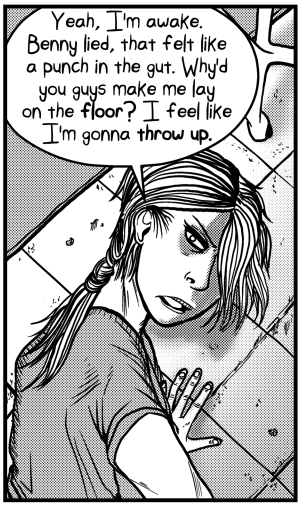


It's just **nothing.** No sounds, no sights, no pain. When you wake up, you'll seem a little... I guess woozy, but after that you're mostly good. Maybe a little nauseated, but nothing too serious. It's honestly kind of nice just not existing for a little while.

Dimitri, there's **nothing** to be afraid of.

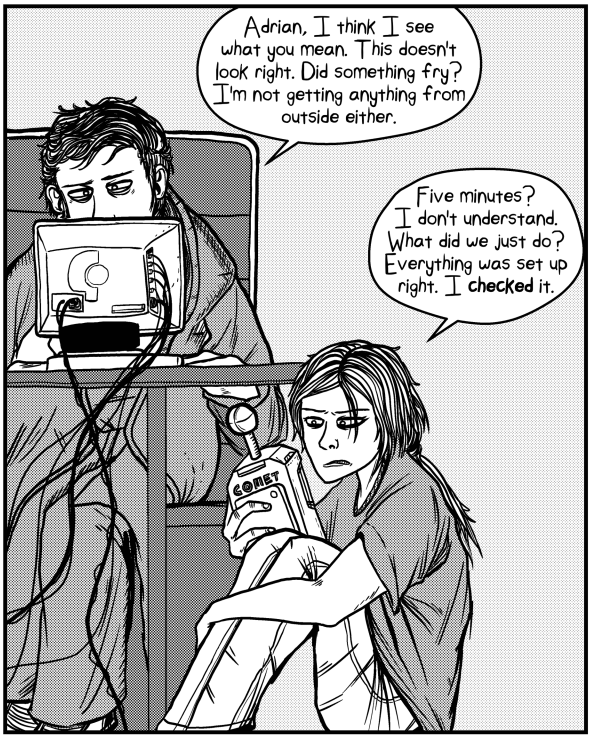

IT'S TIME TO WAKE UP.

Later. Inside the Artifact...
Ugh. Charlotte? Dimitri? Come on, wake up.
Are you two still there?

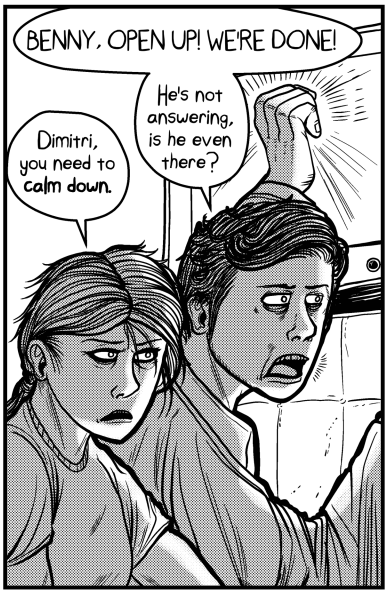

Yeah, I'm awake. Benny lied, that felt like a punch in the gut. Why'd you guys make me lay on the **floor**? I feel like I'm gonna **throw up.**

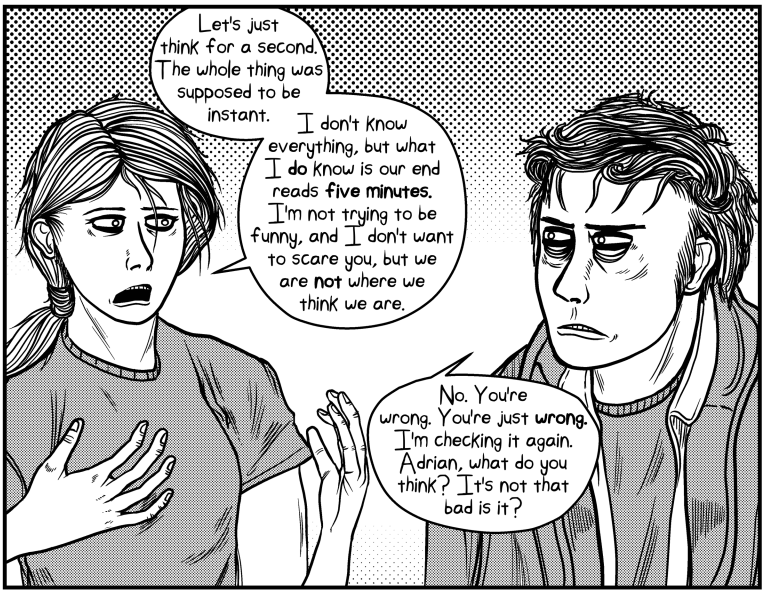
I'm up too. Did we do it? I mean, were we able to skip forward? Check your watch, Adrian. I'm gonna need a few. Everything **hurts.**

Well then, this isn't correct at all. Something happened, surely the failsafe must have...
No, no. I'm sure it's nothing **serious.**
You two, check your timers and then check them again. Let's just stick with the plan before we jump to conclusions.


Adrian, I think I see what you mean. This doesn't look right. Did something fry? I'm not getting anything from outside either.
Five minutes? I don't understand. What did we just do? Everything was set up right. I **checked** it.
COMET

It appears as if we've overshot something. Remember, there are more angles we have to consider before we start panicking. Let's just look at everything again, as it **is.**
I'm knocking on the door. This has to be some sort of elaborate prank or joke or something else. Either way, I'm no longer a fan of this bit.


BENNY, OPEN UP! WE'RE DONE!
He's not answering, is he even there?
Dimitri, you need to **calm down.**

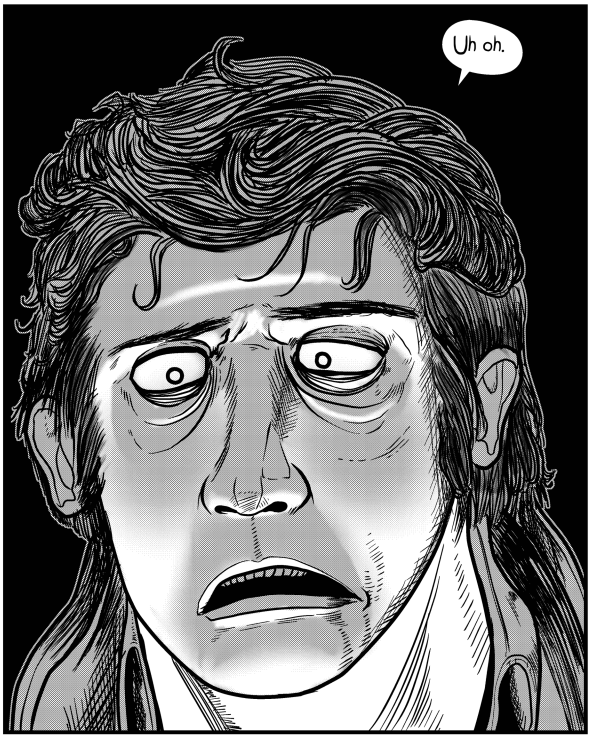

Let's just think for a second. The whole thing was supposed to be instant.
I don't know everything, but what I **do** know is our end reads **five minutes.** I'm not trying to be funny, and I don't want to scare you, but we are **not** where we think we are.
No. You're wrong. You're just **wrong.** I'm checking it again. Adrian, what do you think? It's not that bad is it?

Well Dimitri to be concise, I think I may need a good hard slap in the face.

I think Charlotte might be right. I can't say for certain though. We'll figure it out.
Whatever just happened, we can't leave until we're sure Benjamin has powered the machine down. All of this will get sorted out in the end, I'm sure of it.

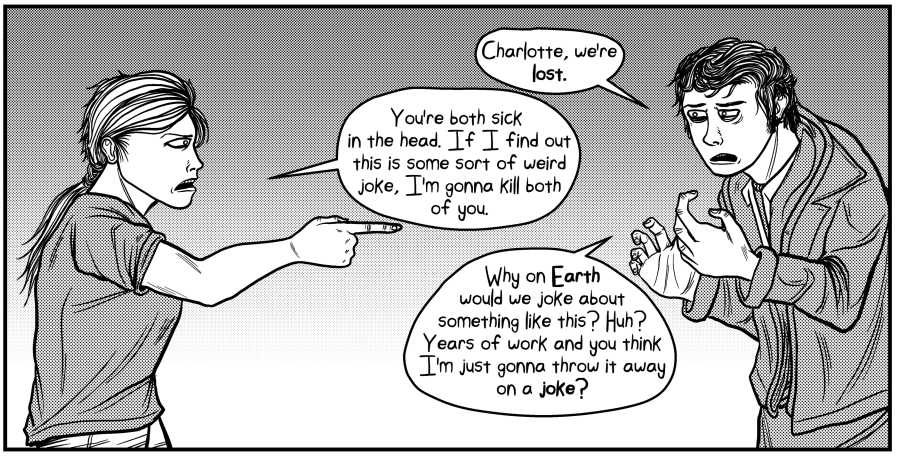
Here, let me try.
BENNY! OPEN THE DOOR! WE'RE DONE!
...AND THIS ISN'T FUNNY!

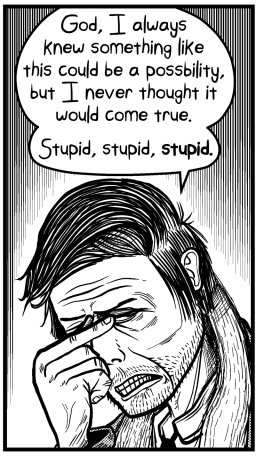
Adrian, have you checked the **relative** time?
...
What? **What?** Come on Adrian, **talk! Say something! What does it say?!**
Have a look.


Uh oh.

Well we definitely overshot it.
[[END OF TRIAL LOG]]
AT = 0000:00:05:00.01
[WARNING][QT] RECEIVER HAS REACHED
SIGNAL OVERLOAD, FALLBACK TO
JIC F: > Overflow > Program Files >
COM33 > JIcapp
B-END AT0 =
9999:99:99:99:99
SEPTEMBER 9, 2559

Are you serious? What am I looking at here? I know this isn't right. What are you trying to tell me by showing me this? **What?**


Charlotte, we're **lost.**
You're both sick in the head. If I find out this is some sort of weird joke, I'm gonna kill both of you.
Why on **Earth** would we joke about something like this? Huh? Years of work and you think I'm just gonna throw it away on a **joke?**


God, I always knew something like this could be a possibility, but I never thought it would come true.
Stupid, stupid, **stupid.**

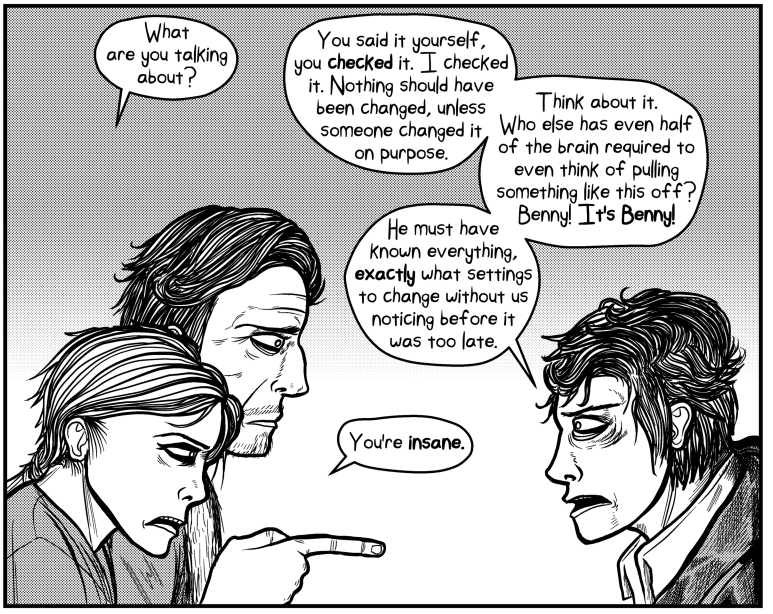
We're not stranded. For all we know, we haven't even been gone for a **year.** I mean, that other stuff, that's just what our clock says. Clocks break all the time right? It's not right. **It can't be.**
I don't want to die. I'm still a virgin.
Shut up! No one's gonna **die.**

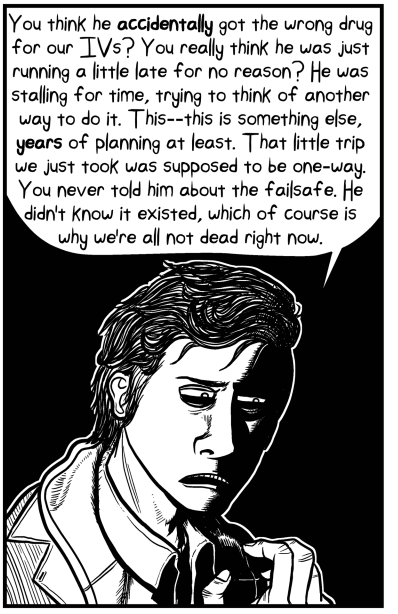
My mom is dead.
Everyone we know is **dead.**

No. No way. Alright, this is stupid. Can't we just make sure before we start freaking out? Let's just leave! Maybe Benny's been out there this whole time. Also even if we really are lost, we can't just stay in here or **we'll die too.**
You kids might be right, that may be the best option. The only way to make sure of our circumstance is to exit the **Artifact.**
Adrian, it's an **RV.** **It's a car!**
No... Wait a second. I know. I know what **happened.**

Benny did this.

WHAT?!
Benny did this.


What are you talking about?
You said it yourself, you **checked** it. I checked it. Nothing should have been changed, unless someone changed it on purpose.
Think about it. Who else has even half of the brain required to even think of pulling something like this off? Benny! **It's Benny!**
He must have known everything, **exactly** what settings to change without us noticing before it was too late.
You're **insane.**


You think he **accidentally** got the wrong drug for our IVs? You really think he was just running a little late for no reason? He was stalling for time, trying to think of another way to do it. This--this is something else, **years** of planning at least. That little trip we just took was supposed to be one-way. You never told him about the failsafe. He didn't know it existed, which of course is why we're all not dead right now.

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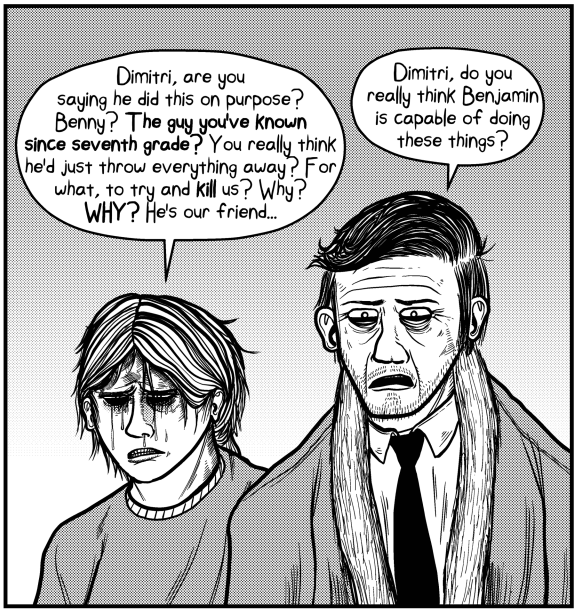
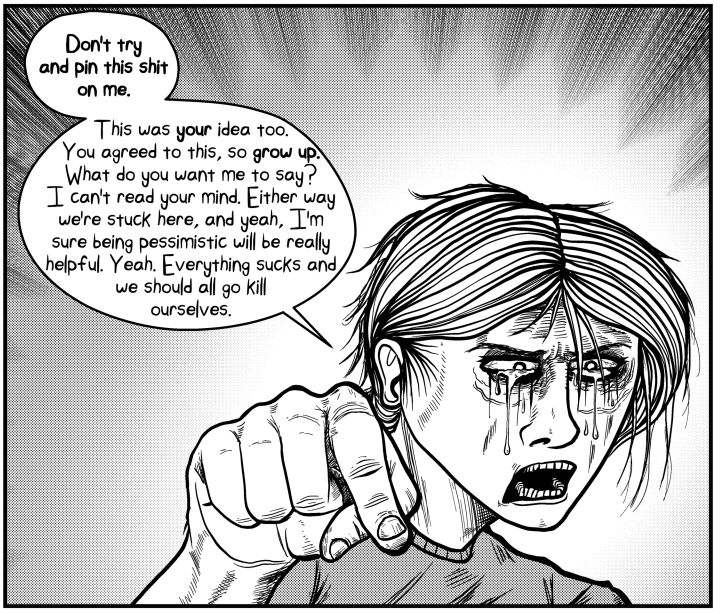

Dimitri, are you saying he did this on purpose? Benny? **The guy you've known since seventh grade?** You really think he'd just throw everything away? For what, to try and **kill** us? Why? **WHY?** He's our friend...
Dimitri, do you really think Benjamin is capable of doing these things?

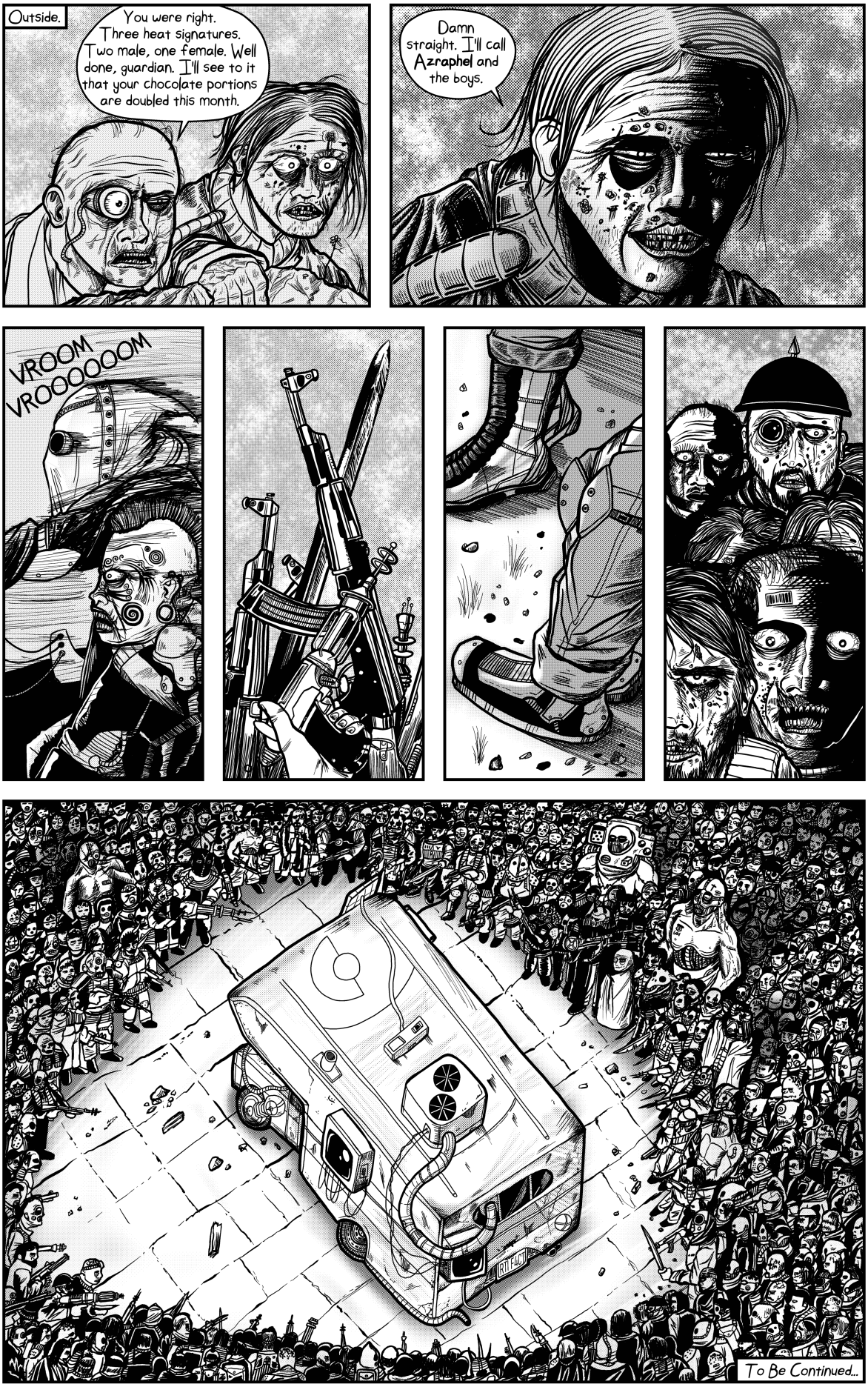
Yes.
Dimitri you know him! We know him! This just doesn't make any sense.
I thought I knew him too. I really did. He's just another actor. Nobody's ever genuine! People just use you and take advantage of you and toss you aside when you're not useful!
Seriously, Dimitri, you don't think it's possible you or I could've made a mistake? How do you know you're not just being paranoid?
You told us you've been having issues, and you're off your meds too-

NO. Don't even go there. Don't even talk about that! It's irrelevant! Screw you for even bringing that up! Screw. You. Seriously. We're all gonna get what's coming to us, all we can do is just wait. God, why did I let you con me into strapping myself to this-this deathtrap? You. You just kept egging me on and I thought I didn't have a choice. YOU! Always complaining and-


Don't try and pin this shit on me.
This was your idea too. You agreed to this, so grow up. What do you want me to say? I can't read your mind. Either way we're stuck here, and yeah, I'm sure being pessimistic will be really helpful. Yeah. Everything sucks and we should all go kill ourselves.

Surely there must be some sort of scientific explanation for all of this.

There's nothing scientific about any of this.
Wait, just shut up for a second. I hear something outside.


Outside.
You were right. Three heat signatures. Two male, one female. Well done, guardian. I'll see to it that your chocolate portions are doubled this month.
Damn straight. I'll call Azraphel and the boys.
VROOM VROOOOOM
To Be Continued...

Strangers on Earth

by Ivan Flores

ISSUE #1

COMING SOON!